

Washington March 17th 1856

AC. 6467A

My Dear Sir



I promised some time ago to give you an account of the incidents in the life of Mr. F. S. Key which led him to write the "Star Spangled Banner"; and of the circumstances under which it was written. The song has become a national one, and will I think from its great merit continue to be so especially in Maryland: and every thing that concerns its author, must be a matter of interest to his children & descendants. Had I hesitated to fulfill my promise with the more pleasure, because while the song shows his genius & taste as a poet, the incidents connected with it & the circumstances under which it was written will show his character & worth as a man. The scene he describes and the warm spirit of patriotism which breathes in the song, are not the offspring of mere fancy, or poetic imagination. He describes what he actually saw. And he tells us what he felt while witnessing the conflict; and what he felt when the battle was over and the victory won by his countrymen. Every word came warm from his heart, and for that reason, even more than from its poetic merit

ment, it never fails to find a response in the hearts of those who listen to it.

You will remember that in 1814 when the
song was written, I resided in Frederick and
Mr. Key in George Town. - You will recollect also that
soon after the British troops retired from Washing-
ton, a squadron of the enemy's ships made their way
up the Potomac, and appeared before Alexandria
which was compelled to capitulate: and the
squadron remained there some days, ~~plundering~~
during the Town of Falmouth, and whatever else
they wanted. It was rumored and believed in
Frederick that a marauding attack of the same
character would be made on Washington and
George Town, before the ships left the river. Mr. Key's
family were still in George Town. He would not
and indeed could not with honor leave the place
while it was threatened by the enemy: for he was
a volunteer in the Light Artillery commanded
by Major Peter, which was composed of citizens of
the District of Columbia, who had uniformed
themselves, & offered their services to the govern-
ment, and who had been employed in active
service, from the time the British fleet appeared
in the Potomac, preparatory to the movement
upon Washington. And Mr. Key refused to
leave home while Mr. Key was ~~there~~ thus daily
exposed

exposed to danger. Believing as we did that an
attack would probably be made on George Town
we became very anxious about the situation
of his family. - For if the attack was made Mr. Key
would be with the troops engaged in the defense
- and as it was impossible to foresee what would
be the issue of the conflict, his family lay remain-
ing in George Town, might be placed in great
& useful peril. When I spoke of her, I mean Mr. Key's
father and mother & Mrs. Loney and myself.
And it was agreed among us that I should go to
George Town, & try to persuade Mrs. Key to come
away with their children, & stay with me or with
Mr. Key's father, until the danger was over. ~~When~~
when I reached George Town I found the English
ships still at Alexandria, and a body of Militia
embarked in Washington which had been
ordered to defend the city. - But it was ^{then} believed
from the information received, that no at-
tempt would be made by the enemy on Washington
or George Town - and preparations were making
on our part to annoy them by batteries on shore
when they descended the river. The knowledge of these
preparations probably hastened their departure:
and the second or third day after my arrival
the ships were seen moving down the Potomac.
On the morning of the day that the enemy dis-
appeared

Joseph and Mr. Birchard had arrived at Mr. Key's
and told him that after the British army passed
through upper Marlboro, on their return to their
ships, and had encamped some miles below
the Town, a detachment was sent back, which
entered Doct. Penn's house about midnight:
compelled him to rise from his bed; and
hurried him off to the British camp, hardly
allowing him time to put his clothes on:
that he was treated with great harshness and
closely guarded: and that as soon as his friends
were apprised of his situation, they hastened
to the head quarters of the English army to solicit
his release: but it was peremptorily refused
and they were not even permitted to see him:
and that he had been carried as a prisoner
on board the fleet. And finding their own efforts
unavailing, and alarmed for his safety, his
friends in and about Marlboro, ~~it was~~ thought
advisable that Mr. Keest should hasten to George
Town, and request Mr. Key to obtain the sanction
of the government to his going on board the
admiral's ship under a flag of truce, and in
discovering the measures the discharge of Doct.
Penn before the fleet sailed. It was then lying
at the mouth of the Potomac & its destina-
tion, was not at that time known with certainty.



Doct^r Beans as perhaps you know, was the
 leading Physician in Upper Marlboro: and
 an accomplished scholar and gentleman. He
 was highly respected by all who knew him: was
 the family Physician of Mr. West, and the intimate
 friend of Mr. Key. He occupied one of the best houses
 in Upper Marlboro, and lived very handsomely.
 And his house was selected for the quarters of
 Admiral Cockburn, and some of the principal
 officers of the army, when the British troops en-
 camped at Marlboro on their march to Wash-
 ington. These officers were of course furnished
 with every thing that the house could offer - and
 they in return treated him with much courtesy
 and placed guards around his grounds and
 outhouses to prevent depredations by their
 troops.

But on the return of the army to the ships, after
 the main body had passed through the Town, stray-
 ers who had left the ranks to plunder ~~in~~ from
 some other motive, made their appearance
 from time to time, singly or in small squads.
 and Doct^r Beans put himself at the head of a
 small body of citizens to pursue and make
 prisoners of them. Information of this proceeding
 was

was by some means or other conveyed to the English
carrack, and the detachment of which I have al-
ready sent back to release the prisoners and
seize Doctor Beane. They did not seem to regard
him and certainly did not treat him as a pri-
soner ^{of war}, but as one who had deceived and broken
his faith to them.

Mr. Key readily agreed to undertake the mission
in his favor, and the President promptly gave his
assent to it. And orders were immediately
issued to have the vessel usually employed as a
carrack in the communications with the fleet in
the Chesapeake, to be made ready without delay;
and Mr. John S. Skinner who was agent for the
government, for flags of truce & exchange of pri-
soners, and who was well known as such to the
officers of the fleet, was directed to accompany
Mr. Key. - And as soon as the arrangements were
made, he hastened to Baltimore where he
was to embark: and Mrs. Key & the children
went with me to Frederick, & from thence
to his father's on Pipe Creek where she remained
until he returned.

We heard nothing from him, until the enemy
retracted from Baltimore - which as well
as I can now recollect was a week or two
days

after he left us. And we were becoming uneasy about him, when to our great joy he made his appearance at my house on his way to join his family.

He told me that he found the British fleet at the mouth of the Potomac, preparing for the expedition against Baltimore. He was courteously received by Admiral Cochrane & the officers of the army as well as the Navy. But when he made known his business, his application was received so coldly that he feared it would fail. Gen. Prop, and Admiral Cockburn (who accompanied the expedition to headington, particularly the latter - spoke of Doct. Beane in very harsh terms, and seemed at first not disposed to release him. It however happened fortunately that Mr. Skinner carried letters from the wounded British officers left at Bladensburg. And in these letters to their friends on board the fleet, they all spoke of the humanity & kindness with which they had been treated, after they had fallen into our hands. And after a good deal of conversation & strong representations from Mr. Key as to the character and standing of Doct. Beane, and of the deep interest which the community in which he lived took

took in his fate, Genl. Key said that Doct. Brans
deserved much more punishment than he had
received - but that he felt himself bound to make
a return for the kindness which had been shown
to his wounded officers, whom he had been com-
pelled to leave at Bladensburg - and upon that
ground and that only he would release him.
But Mr. Key was at the same time informed that
neither he nor any one else would be permitted
to leave the fleet for some days - and must be
detained until the attack on Baltimore, which
was then about to be made was over. But he
was assured that they would make him & Mr. Skinner
as comfortable as possible while they detained
them. Admiral Cochrane with whom they dined
on the day of their arrival, apologized for not
accommodating them, on his own ship - say-
ing that it was crowded already with officers
of the army: but that they would be well taken
care of in the Frigate *Surprise* commanded by
his son Sir Thomas Cochrane. And to this Frigate
they were accordingly transferred.

Mr. Key had an interview with Doct. Brans
before Genl. Key consented to release him. I do not
now recollect whether he was on board of the
Admiral's ship, or the *Surprise*. but I believe
it



it was the farmer. He found him in the forward part of the ship among the sailors & soldiers - he had not had a change of clothes from the time he was seized: was constantly treated with indignity by those around him - and no officer would speak to him. He was treated as a unit - not as a prisoner of war. And this harsh and humiliating treatment continued until he was placed on board the Cartel.

Something must have happened when the officers were quartered at his house on the march to Washington, which in the judgment of Genl. Prop bound him not to take arms against the English forces until the troops had re-embarked. It is impossible upon any other ground to account for the manner in which he was spoken of and treated. But whatever Genl. Prop & the other officers may have thought I am quite sure that Genl. Beane did not think he was in any degree pledged to abstain from active hostilities against the public enemy. And when he made prisoners of the strugglers, he did not consider himself as a prisoner on parole - nor suppose himself to be violating any obligation that he had incurred. For he was a gentleman of untainted character.

and a nice sense of honor, & incapable of doing
any thing that could have justified such treat-
ment. - Mr. Key imputed the ill usage he received
~~assigned~~ to the influence of Admiral Cockburn
who it is still remembered, while he commanded
in the Chesapeake, carried on hostilities in
in a vindictive temper - appealing & plun-
dering defenceless villages. - or countenancing
such proceedings by those under his com-
mand.

Mr. Key & Mr. Skinner continued on board of
the "Surprise," where they were very kindly treated
by Sir Thomas Cochrane, until the fleet moved
for the Patuxent, & preparations were making for
landing the troops. Admiral Cockburn then
shifted his flag to the Frigate, in order that
he might be able to move further up the
river, & superintend in person the attack
by water on the Fort. And Mr. Key & Mr. Skinner
were then sent on board their own vessel, with
a guard of sailors or Marines to prevent them
from landing. They were permitted to take
Doct. Beons with them: and they thought them-
selves fortunate in being anchored in a po-
sition which enabled them to see distinctly the
flag of Fort M. Henry from the deck of the vessel.

He proceeded then with much animation to describe the scene on the night of the bombardment. He and Mr. Thimble remained on deck during the night watching every shell from the moment it was fired, until it fell - and when it fell listening with breathless interest to hear if an explosion followed. While the bombardment continued, it was sufficient proof that the Fort had not surrendered. But it suddenly ceased some time before day, and as they had no communication with any of the enemy's ships, they did not know whether the Fort had surrendered, or the attack upon it ^{been} abandoned. They paced the deck for the residue of the night in painful suspense watching with intense anxiety for the return of day, & looking every few minutes at their watches to see how long they must wait for it: and as soon as it dawned and before it was light enough to see objects at a distance their glasses were turned to the Fort uncertain whether they should see there the stars & stripes on the flag of the enemy. At length the light came, and they saw that "our flag was still there". And as the day advanced they ^{discovered} ~~discovered~~ from the movements

movements of the boats, between the shore, and the
fleet, that the troops had been roughly handled, and
that many wounded men were carried to the
ships. At length he was informed that the attack on
Baltimore ^{had failed} ~~was abandoned~~, and the British army
re-embarking: and that he and Mr. Skinner and
Sect. ^{Beane} would be permitted to leave them & go
where they pleased, as soon as the troops were
on board & the fleet ready to sail.

He then told me that under the excitement of the
time he had written a song, and handed me a
printed copy of the Star Spangled Banner. - When I had
read it and expressed my admiration, I asked him
how he had found time in the scenes he had been
passing through to compose such a song?
He said he commenced it on the deck of their vessel
in the fervor of the moment when he saw the
enemy hastily retreating to their ships, & looked
at the flag he had watched for ^{so} anxiously as the
morning opened: that he had written some lines -
or brief notes that would ^{aid} him in recalling them
to his mind, upon the back of a letter which he
happened to have in his pocket: and for some of
the lines as he proceeded he was obliged to rely alto-
gether on his memory: and that he finished it in
the boat on his way to the shore: and wrote it out

it now stands, at the Hotel on the night he reached Baltimore, & immediately after he arrived. He said that on the next morning he took it to Judge Nicholson to ask him what he thought of it: and that he was so much pleased with it that he immediately sent it to a printer, and directed copies to be struck off in broadbill form. And that Mr. Key believed it had been favorably received by the Baltimore public.

Judge Nicholson & Mr. Key you know were nearly connected by marriage - Mrs. Nicholson & Mr. Key being sisters. The Judge was a man of cultivated taste - had at one time been distinguished among the leading men in Congress, and was at the period of which I am speaking, the Chief Justice for the Baltimore Circuit, and one of the Judges of the Court of Appeals of Maryland. Notwithstanding his judicial character which exempted him from military service, he accepted the ^{command} of a volunteer company of Artillery. And when the enemy approached & an attack on the Fort was expected he and his company offered their services to the government to assist in its defence. They were accepted and formed a part of the garrison during the bombardment. - The Judge had been relieved from

from duty and returned to his family only the night before Mr. Key delivered him his song. And you may easily imagine, ^{with} the feelings, which of such a moment he made it, and gave it to the public. It was no doubt as Mr. Key modestly expressed it favorably received. In less than an hour after it was placed in the hands of the printer, it was all over Town - and visited with enthusiasm - and took its place at once as a national song.

I have made this account of "The Star Spangled Banner" longer than I intended, and find that I have introduced incidents & persons, outside of the subject I originally ~~intended~~ ^{intended} to treat - I should have felt a melancholy pleasure in recalling events connected in any degree with the life of one, with whom I was so long and so closely united in friendship & affection: and whom I so much admired for his brilliant genius & loved for his many virtues. I am sure however that neither you nor any of his children or descendants will think the account I have given too long. With regards to his
Your friend truly

Charles Howard Esq.
Baltimore

R. B. Taney